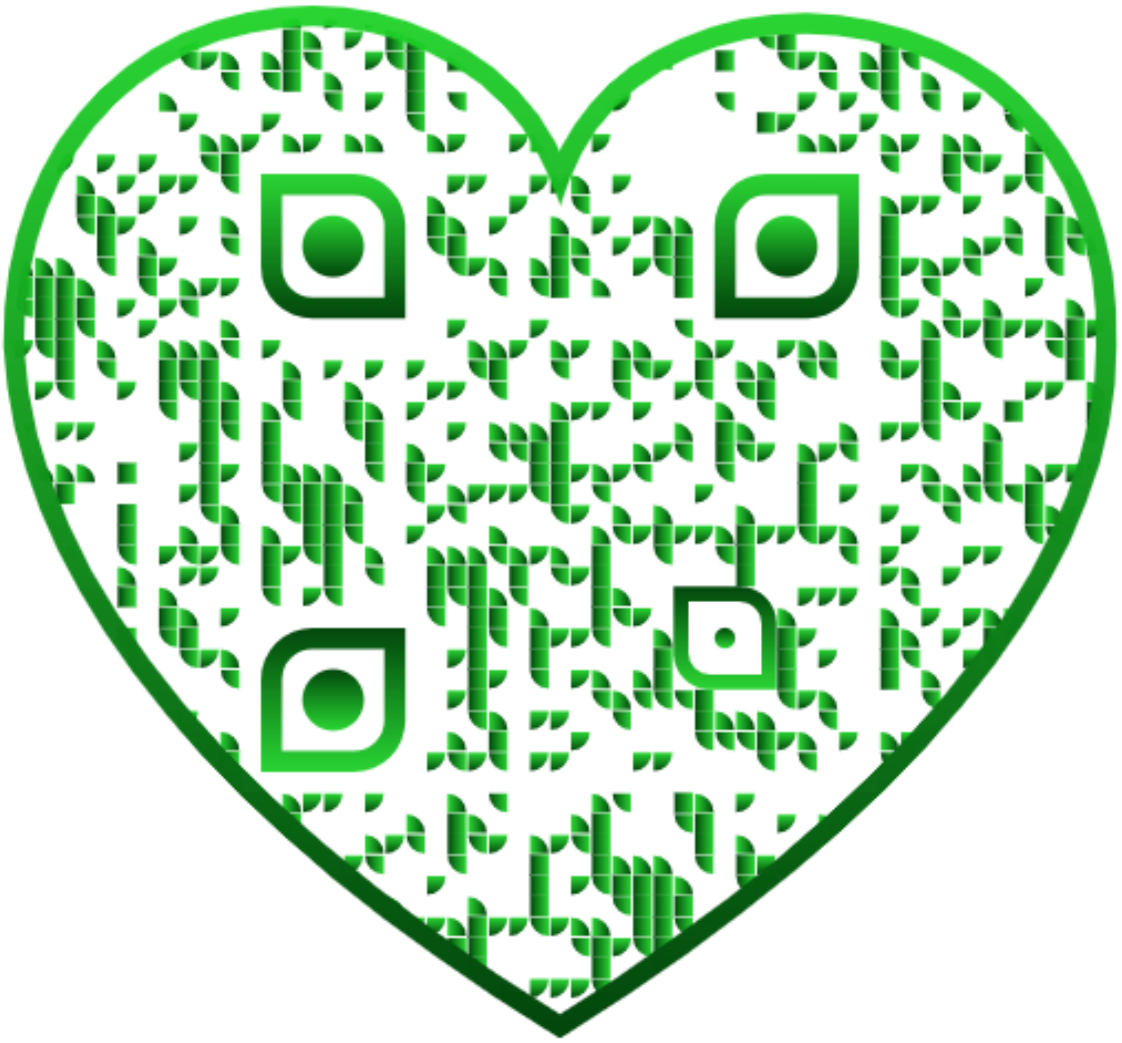
History in an hour

Anthony Holmes

ANCIENT EGYPT



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Introduction

The history and mystery of ancient Egypt stirs our imagination and stimulates our desire to understand more about the most influential civilization of the pre-Christian era. The ancient Egyptians preserved their dead in decorated tombs and built magnificent monuments, while other nascent cultures still dressed in skins and lived in rudimentary dwellings. They built in stone, and their choice of construction material has been a boon to those who have tried to unravel the 3,000-year history of their civilization. Painted and inscribed rock-cut tombs, sandstone temples and granite statues have provided us with a comprehensive understanding of their life and culture.

The Egyptians believed in strange animal-headed gods; they mummified their dead in preparation for their journey into the afterlife; they built imposing and enduring stone structures using only Bronze Age tools and their country remained virtually inviolate, unconquered and unchanged for over more than three millennia.

Where did they come from? How did they achieve and maintain a cohesive cultural identity over all that time? What secrets have already been discovered by archaeologists and what revelations might still be waiting to be found hidden in the desert sands of Egypt? Finally, what legacy did they leave to us as we enter the third millennium AD?

This, in an hour, is Ancient Egypt.

Ancient Egyptian Civilization

‘Egypt is the gift of the Nile’ wrote the Greek historian Herodotus in *c.*400 BC. The River Nile was much more than a reliable source of water; the annual inundation resulting from melting snow and the rainfall in the highlands of Ethiopia brought with it the life-giving silt and nutrients that created the fertile strip of land along its banks. The Nile was the magnet that drew disparate tribes from the surrounding areas and, with its abundance of fish and water fowl, was also the reason for the consolidation of fragmented tribes into the nation called Egypt.

From *c.*4000 BC to the present day, the inhabited regions of Egypt have been restricted to areas of arable land plus some coastal towns and isolated oases in the Sahara Desert. The populated land is divided into two main areas. The first is the triangular delta region to the north where the Nile splits into branches and eventually flows into the Mediterranean Sea. The second area is the region to the south of the delta along the Nile to Egypt’s southern border with Sudan.

The Nile flows from south to north. To journey ‘upstream’ means to travel south, consequently the delta region to the north was called Lower Egypt. The region to the south, along the upper reaches of the Nile, was called Upper Egypt. In our modern convention of drawing maps with north at the top of the page, these names might seem back to front.

Once a society was established along its banks, the Egyptians used the Nile as their main artery for transport. Ships used the river’s strong current to voyage from south to north. On the return voyage, they hoisted a sail to capture the prevailing wind from the north and augmented their progress with oars to propel the vessels upstream to the south.

Egypt was not always as dry as it is now. Archaeological evidence revealed the existence of human habitation in south-west Egypt as early as *c.*8000 BC. During that period, the Egyptian climate was far wetter than it is today. Dramatic climate change around 8000 BC saw the gradual desertification of the grasslands and the formation of the Sahara Desert.

Ancient Egypt

The climate change that dried out western Egypt resulted in the rain moving eastwards. Tribes from the desiccated grasslands moved to the Nile valley and the delta, to take advantage of the seasonal flood of the Nile. The staple foods were already established as wheat and barley, with flax providing the raw material for fabric and rope production.

By *c.*6000 BC, Egyptians in the south-west were herding cattle and constructing buildings. Permanent settlements existed in *c.*5500 BC, when inhabitants focused on cereal growing and animal herding. Archaeologists have unearthed burial goods such as metal items, woven baskets, tanned animal hides, hunting tools and woven fabrics dated to *c.*5000 BC. The dead were buried facing west towards Libya, perhaps looking to their original homeland, and the concept that the western bank of the Nile was the realm of the dead was to remain a feature of Egyptian culture and was a belief that gave rise in modern times to the phrase ‘gone west’.

Naqada pottery

Artefacts from the period 5200 BC to 4000 BC discovered at Fayoum Oasis included stone axes, dolerite mace heads, arrowheads, stone palettes, pots, cups and stone beads. Furniture, tableware, decorated pots, combs made from bone and figurines all appeared around this time. Foreign artefacts relating to this period indicate contacts as distant as Lebanon and Syria.

The Naqada culture, named after the town of Nubt, meaning ‘city of gold’, commenced *c.*4000 BC and continued to *c.*3200 BC, a left pottery decorated with recognizable human and animal shapes. Potters made models of houses which were included in burial goods. Designs on pottery depicting humans and animals became more realistic by *c.*4000 BC, and techniques of stonework were developed. Tomb building, including the construction of underground storerooms, appeared in the second phase of the Naqada. The burial practices are recognizable as the early Osiris cult of ancient Egypt, and the decorations on the pottery resembled hieroglyphs.

The Dynastic Period: *c.*4000 BC–3100 BC

From *c.*4000 BC to *c.*3100 BC the Egyptian population was fragmented and comprised various tribes living in Lower and Upper Egypt. As the population increased and the desert encroached, so did the people's need to expand their access to water and land. Tribal warfare would have been commonplace, although inter-tribal trading between the north and the south was also evident.

Centres of power developed in small autonomous political entities in Lower Egypt and at two centres in Upper Egypt, specifically at Nubt (Naqada) and Nekhen (Hierakonpolis). This somewhat chaotic situation was about to change, with the establishment of what is called Dynasty 0 (zero).

The consolidation of Upper and Lower Egypt under a single centre of rule took place in *c.*3100 BC. This time of unification is generally recognized as the beginning of ancient Egyptian civilization. The actual dynamics are uncertain, but the name of King Narmer is preeminent. He is generally recognized as the first king of a unified Upper and Lower Egypt.

An immensely important artefact in the Cairo Museum called the 'Palette of King Narmer' shows Narmer wearing the crowns of both Upper and Lower Egypt. The palette also contains some of the earliest known hieroglyphs. Little is known about Narmer. His base of power was Nekhen, where the 'lords of Nekhen' banded together to secure domination of the entire land under a single king.

The Palette of King Narmer

The Old Kingdom: 2649 BC–2152 BC

The Old Kingdom covered a period of approximately 500 years that spanned the 3rd to the 6th Dynasties, during which time Egypt experienced its great age of pyramid building in a 45-mile span of desert.

The Pyramids of Giza

The major contributors to the construction of pyramids were:

King Djoser ‘The Holy’ (*c.*2667 BC–2648 BC)

The second king of the 3rd Dynasty was named Djoser. Up to the time of his reign, burials took place in the ground. An underground chamber was excavated to house the deceased’s remains and a mud-brick structure with a rectangular base, sloping sides and a flat roof was built over the burial site as an offertory chapel. The Arabic word *mastaba*, meaning *bench*, which was used to describe to shape of the structure has been adopted by archaeologists to refer to the entire tomb.

The Stepped Pyramid of Djoser
Photograph by Gary Ku

Djoser's architect, Imhotep, was tasked with excavating and lining a complex underground structure for the king's burial at Saqqara. It was covered with a *mastaba* built of stone. A second, smaller *mastaba* was built in stone on the first and so on until Djoser's 'six-step pyramid' was completed. It was the first stone structure of significance in ancient Egypt, and indeed the world, and remains impressive today.

King Sneferu (*c.*2613 BC–2589 BC)

The first king of the 4th Dynasty, Sneferu used the design of Djoser's stepped pyramid to build his own memorials. Sneferu is credited with three, possibly four, pyramids, although the first, now called the Meidum Pyramid, may have been built by Sneferu's father, Huni.

Sneferu preferred a smooth-sided structure. The builders filled the steps with mud bricks, and clad the resulting structure with limestone slabs. The limestone casing is thought to have collapsed about 1,000 years later. The limestone cladding was removed for other purposes and the underlying mud bricks slumped into an untidy heap around the stone core.

The ‘Bent’ Pyramid of Sneferu

Sneferu’s second pyramid is called the ‘Bent Pyramid’ because the angle of its sides was changed midway through construction from 55° to 43°. It has been suggested that it was possibly a pyramid built on top of a *mastaba*, or perhaps the structure was not strong enough and the builders changed the design to lighten the load.

Sneferu’s third pyramid is called the ‘North’ or ‘Red Pyramid’. It has a more gentle (43°) slope and internal chambers built from red granite. It is not known whether Sneferu was buried in one of his pyramids as his sarcophagus and corpse were not found, but the three practice runs at pyramid construction brought Khufu, Sneferu’s son, on to the scene. King Khufu was the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza.

King Khufu (*c.*2589 BC–2566 BC)

The colossal structure of the Great Pyramid of Khufu was the world’s tallest man-made structure for 3,800 years, until the construction of Lincoln Cathedral in the 1300s. It is the largest and only surviving example of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It took about 20 years to build, is 146.5 metres high, and comprises 2.3 million limestone blocks with a total mass estimated at 5.9 million tonnes.

Khufu

Modern builders would be hard-pressed to equal the accuracy of the construction which is remarkable, taking into account the simple tools and instruments available at the time. Chambers were built inside the pyramids during the construction phase. The two main chambers within the Great Pyramid are called (by convention) the King's Chamber and the Queen's Chamber and they are interconnected by a corbelled grand gallery.

The Great Pyramid of Khufu

A major misconception, first promulgated by the Jewish historian Josephus in the first century AD and subsequently fuelled by Hollywood movies, is that the Great

Pyramid was built by Hebrew slaves who were subjected to inhumane conditions as they were forced to drag huge blocks of stone. The story goes that slave overseers cracked whips and beat the workers unmercifully. This myth persists regardless that when the pyramids of Giza were built the hard labour suffered by the Hebrews in the brick-making pits of the early Rameside Period was still 1,000 years in the future. The truth behind the construction of the pyramids would not be sufficiently dramatic for the silver screen.

The pyramids of the 4th Dynasty were built by Egyptians. A core of full-time construction personnel was augmented annually during the period of the Nile flood by farmers and other men who could not work during the inundation. At the peak there may have been 20–25,000 men working on the Great Pyramid. They were housed and well fed in a workers' village close to the construction site. Archaeologists have discovered the remains of their dormitories and eating halls.

Their diet comprised highly nutritious bread and beer and even fish and meat. They had access to medical care as has been demonstrated by the examination of skeletal remains showing set and healed broken limbs. They also received 'tax rebates' for working on the project. Crews working on the site adopted names such as 'Friends of Khufu' and 'The Drunken Gang' and they were very competitive in terms of achieving their daily quotas. It was indeed considered a privilege to contribute to the memorial of the divine pharaoh and their work added to their credit for the afterlife.

The fundamental reason for pyramid building remains a contentious issue. Conventional wisdom suggests that pyramids were the tombs of the pharaohs. Other theories range from those based on mystic symbolism to the incorporation of prophetic measurements into the structure or even extra-terrestrial intervention.

It cannot be stated for certain that the Great Pyramid was the final resting place of King Khufu, who commissioned its construction. Modern investigation into the small rectangular shafts that extend from the Queen's and King's Chambers towards the surface of the pyramid shows that the shafts point directly to certain stars known to have religious significance for the ancient Egyptians. This fact has led to the hypothesis that the king's body was laid in the burial chamber and his spirit (his *Ka*) was directed to those particular stars through the shafts. His body may subsequently have been removed and interred elsewhere.

Khufu's son Djedefre built a lesser pyramid at Abu Rowash (8 kilometres north of Giza) which may have been unfinished and is now virtually destroyed.

King Khafre (*c.*2558–2532 BC)

The second large pyramid at Giza was built by Khufu's grandson Khafre, who is

also credited with the sculpture of the Sphinx. The second pyramid is a little smaller than the Great Pyramid but, built on a slightly higher elevation, it looks about the same size.

The Pyramid of Khafre and the Sphinx

The Sphinx poses a different challenge for those who wish to understand ancient Egypt. The shape of the lion was carved from a rock outcrop of soft sandstone. It is thought to have been sculptured at the time the pyramids of Giza were built, some 4,500 years ago, but there is a hypothesis, based on the erosion of the body, that it is much older. The Sphinx has spent much of its existence covered by desert sand which protected it from sand and wind erosion. However, the body is deeply etched with vertical erosion channels, which suggests it may have been exposed during the wet period prior to *c.*8000 BC. This, however, is still much controverted.

The head of the pharaoh was carved, supposedly as a likeness of Khafre. One theory proposes that the sculpture was originally that of a maned lion and the reshaping of the head to that of a pharaoh took place at the time of Khafre.

The great sculpture was called the Sphinx by the Greeks who equated it with their own myth of a sphinx that had the head of a woman, the body of a lion and the wings of a bird. The Egyptian religion like many other early cults believed the sun was controlled by a god, in this case Re. The Sphinx accurately faces the eastern horizon and greets the rising of the sun god Re precisely on the mornings of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes.

Over the centuries, the Sphinx has lost its pharaonic beard, part of which is in the British Museum, and likewise the sacred cobra from its forehead. The most disfiguring loss is that of its nose which would have been about a metre wide at the nostrils. Examination of the Sphinx’s face shows that long rods or chisels were hammered into the nose, one down from the bridge and one beneath the nostrils.

The rods were then used to prise the nose off.

The Egyptian Arab historian Al-Maqrīzī, writing in the fifteenth century AD, attributes the loss of the nose to the destructive act of Muhammad Sa'im al-Dahr, a Sufi Muslim. In AD 1378, upon finding the Egyptian peasants making offerings to the Sphinx in the hope of increasing their harvest, Sa'im al-Dahr was so outraged that he destroyed the nose. He was hanged for vandalism.

A story claiming that the nose was broken off by a cannonball fired by Napoleon's soldiers is entirely false. A painting of the Sphinx, made sixty years before Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, shows the Sphinx without a nose, but the cannonball legend still lives on today.

The suggestion that there may be chambers beneath the Sphinx containing records of 'ancient wisdom' has persisted for decades. Ground-penetrating radar has shown that voids do exist, but experts believe these are naturally occurring spaces, and were not created or enhanced by man.

The third pyramid on the same site at Giza is very much smaller than the two major pyramids. It was built by Menkaure, the son of Khafre. In addition there are three small satellite pyramids.

In an endeavour to consolidate a theory as to the purpose of the pyramids, Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert, authors of *The Orion Mystery*, propose that the three pyramids of Giza reflect the position of the three stars of Orion's Belt, using the River Nile as an earthly image of the Milky Way. It is also suggested that the many other pyramids contribute to an earthly map of the night sky over ancient Egypt. Most Egyptologists remain unconvinced by this theory.

The Ancient Religion

People of ancient times did not have scientific explanations for natural phenomena such as weather, floods, pestilence or even the daily sunrise, so they assumed supernatural powers were involved. Gods were invented to rationalize matters that were otherwise inexplicable. The first of the divine responsibilities was the creation of their world.

They imagined a formless watery infinity called 'the Nun'. There were several gods involved in creation. Ptah used the power of words to create the world. When he spoke, his words became reality through the active power of the god Atum and whatever Ptah gave a name was created. The god of air was called Shu and his wife Tefnut was the goddess of moisture. Their son Geb was the god of the earth and his sister Nut was the goddess of the sky.

According to the legend, Geb saw the beauty of his sister Nut and lay with her. Nut's father Shu was jealous and tore the two apart, thus was the sky separated from

the earth by the air. Shu cast a spell on his daughter, decreeing that she might never have a child on any day of the year. In those days the year comprised twelve months of thirty days each, a total of three hundred and sixty days. Nut threw dice with Thoth, the god of wisdom and time, and won five days from him. These days were not in the year and so fell outside of her father's spell. Nut had five children, one on each of the extra days. One child, Haroeris, was taken back to the gods. The other children of Nut, who went down to earth, were Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys.

It was the ibis-headed god Thoth, who brought wisdom and writing to the land, and the ram-headed god Khnum, who moulded children from clay on his potter's wheel. Re-Harakhte the falcon-headed sun god brought light and warmth and crossed the sky daily in a solar barque.

The legend of the murder of Osiris by his brother Seth was basic to their belief system. Seth killed Osiris and cut his body into several pieces and spread them around the countryside. For his pains, Osiris became god of the underworld and resurrection.

Meanwhile, Osiris' sister and wife, Isis, collected the pieces and bound them together. She then used powerful magic to invigorate Osiris for one final act of copulation before he became the god of the dead. Isis gave birth to a son, Horus, who reigned for many years, some say centuries, until he died, when he went to join his father, Osiris. All subsequent kings of Egypt were called Horus while they reigned and when they died their death was referred to as 'renewing Osiris'.

In addition to the creator gods, there were gods to take care of daily needs: Sobek controlled the dangerous crocodiles; Taweret protected pregnant women; Renenutet was the goddess of harvests; Hapi was the god of the Nile; Bes was a household god. The enthroned king was considered divine and able to converse with the more than six hundred gods.

The ancient Egyptians believed the condition of truth, justice and harmony was imperative and they assigned a goddess called Ma'at to this state of equilibrium. It was the king's prime duty to preserve the state of Ma'at in the land.

The belief in an afterlife predated the first king of a united Egypt, but was refined over the centuries. All deeds, good and evil, were accumulated in the heart. Good deeds lightened the heart; evil deeds made it heavier. Upon death the heart was weighed in a balance against a feather, the symbol of Ma'at. If evil deeds exceeded good deeds, the heavy heart would cause the balance to fall. The heart would be fed to the beast Ammut and there would be no afterlife. If good deeds exceeded evil ones, the scale pan containing the light heart would rise and judgement would be declared in favour of the deceased.

After a favourable judgement, the spirit was transformed into a being of pure light which would spend eternity in the solar barque with Re. The immortal double (called the *Ka*) would spend its eternity based in and around the tomb and the

mummy of the deceased. The *Ka* would enjoy the afterlife, similar in most ways to the physical life it had left, but perfect in every way.

First Intermediate Period: 2160 BC–2055 BC

The 6th Dynasty ended with the death of King Pepy II. The period that followed saw the collapse of the nation state. Egyptian intermediate periods are times when the centralized government weakened and rivals claimed the throne, and the First Intermediate Period is often characterized as chaotic and miserable, with degraded art. But it was not necessarily a dark age. Food was in short supply, possibly due to failures of the annual flood, though there are bragging inscriptions about how local rulers were able to provide for their people in the face of great adversity. There is also evidence of thriving culture and the development of towns. Non-royal people gained in status. Pottery changed shape due to more efficient use of the pottery wheel. Cartonnage, the gypsum, linen and papyrus coloured mask used to cover the face of a mummy was developed and more non-royal people were buried with valuable grave goods. The First Intermediate Period was also the setting for later philosophical texts.

The nation split into Upper and Lower Egypt with several shadowy dynasties (the 7th to 10th) ruling separately or in parallel, prevailing for short periods. The *nomarchs* (chiefs of the various provinces) took the titles and trappings of kingship upon themselves, each having his own military force and striving for power over his neighbour.

Not much is known about the early part of the First Intermediate Period. By the second half of it, there were two competing *nomes* (provinces) with their own *nomarchs*. The Theban king, King Mentuhotep II, defeated his unknown Herakleapolitan rival in about 2040 BC, putting an end to the First Intermediate Period.

The Middle Kingdom: 2055 BC–1650 BC

The Middle Kingdom began with Mentuhotep II reuniting Egypt. He ruled for fifty-one years and his reign brought stability. His reunification meant removing the armies from the control of the *nomarchs*. Mentuhotep II built his memorial temple at Deir el-Bahri and his successors ruled for some time but eventually Amenemhat I replaced his weak grandson, Mentuhotep IV, marking the end of the 11th Dynasty.

King Mentuhotep II

Amenemhat I required assistance of the *nomarchs* for his coup and the *nomarchs* that aided him were permitted to hold sovereign powers. Trade picked up dramatically. Crops were cultivated in the Fayoum Oasis, gold-producing mines were established and stone was quarried for building projects. It was a period of great building activity. The 12th Dynasty reestablished pyramid building and each king was interred in his own pyramid.

Other structures were built during this time. Amenemhat I built a series of fortresses while his son, Senusret I, built at least thirteen fortresses which went as far as the Second Cataract along the west bank of the Nile.

The Middle Kingdom was a relatively peaceful period but came to an end when the 13th Dynasty lost control as the later, weaker kings of that dynasty came to power. The close of the Middle Kingdom is not clearly defined. The kings of the

14th Dynasty initially had fairly long and prosperous reigns, ruling from the city of Avaris and controlling the eastern part (if not all) of the delta. During the second half of the 14th Dynasty, a succession of short reigns weakened the authority of the throne, making Avaris a soft target for the invading troops of the foreign people known as the Hyksos.

Egypt was divided again and the Second Intermediate Period began.

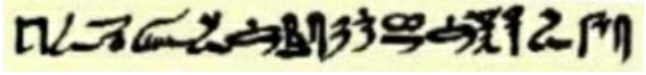
Hieroglyphs and writing

As the civilization developed, so did the need for written communication, primarily for administrative and financial purposes but also for art. Ancient Egyptian writing used more than 2,000 and perhaps as many as 5,000 hieroglyphic characters. Each hieroglyph represented a common object or animal, or could represent the sound of the object or an idea associated with it. In 1799, Napoleon's occupying army discovered the Rosetta Stone (now in the British Museum) on which the same proclamation is inscribed in three languages: hieroglyphs, Demotic and Greek. Jean-François Champollion cracked the code of hieroglyphic writing and through his work we can now understand the inscriptions in ancient Egyptian writing.

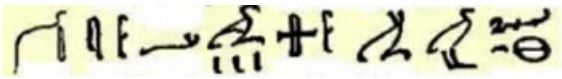
Hieroglyphs did not appear spontaneously, but there is very little evidence of their gradual evolution. It is known that hieroglyphs were in use in the early Dynastic Period (for example on the Palette of King Narmer, as mentioned above). Hieroglyphs could be written top downwards, left to right or right to left. The direction of reading was determined by the direction the animal characters faced, and in order to read them properly, you need to read towards the faces.

Writing and reading hieroglyphs was the task of the scribes as the majority of ancient Egyptians were illiterate. 'Hieratic' was a derivation of hieroglyphic writing in which a cursive form of hieroglyphs was used for administration and other mundane communication. Much later, a form of writing appeared called 'Demotic', a further evolution of Hieratic.

Some basic hieroglyphs



A line of Hieratic writing



An example of Demotic writing

The king's name was enclosed in a symbol the French called 'cartouche' because they looked like cartridges. Some examples are:

Second Intermediate Period: *c.*1650 BC–1550 BC

The Second Intermediate Period was dominated by the first foreign rulers of Egypt, the Hyksos. This group came from the Levant and ruled as the 15th and 16th dynasties from their capital at Avaris in the Nile delta. The rulers kept to the existing Egyptian systems – they kept records in Egyptian script, used Egyptian royal titles and copied Egyptian artistic styles.

The tradition of royal burial in pyramids ceased at the end of the Middle Kingdom (around 1750 BC) and the burial places of the Hyksos kings have not been found – it is possible they were destroyed. The subsequent native Egyptian rulers of the south were buried in rock-cut tombs in their capital Thebes.

The Hyksos Dynasty took its pharaonic responsibilities seriously and encouraged building, the arts and crafts and literature. It was a time of technical innovation. The Hyksos brought the horse harness and war chariots to Egypt.

The Hyksos controlled the northern part of Egypt, while in the south an Egyptian dynasty emerged under its founder, Rahotep. The Theban kings warred against the Hyksos and forced them back to the delta. One of the Theban kings, Kamose, died in battle, but he left a successor, Ahmose, who completed the task and drove the Hyksos out of Egypt. Ahmose became the founder of the mighty 18th Dynasty.

Mummification

Mummification, the art of preserving a body, is a defining element of ancient Egyptian civilization. Mummification differs from the science of embalming. The latter is defined as delaying decomposition to keep the corpse looking natural. The traditional Egyptian mummy, swathed in bandages, is a far cry from an embalmed lifelike body such as that of Vladimir Lenin.

The word ‘mummy’ is derived from ‘*mummia*’, a bituminous resin found in ancient Persia; however ‘mummy’ itself is a relatively modern term. *Mummia* was not used in mummification, but when mummies were discovered coated with dark plant resin it was assumed *mummia* played a role and the term mummification was coined.

There are two elements to mummification, the physical process and the religious symbolism. The physical process was a secretive art and our knowledge is derived from ‘reverse engineering’ of the many mummies that survived. Information has also been derived from the experiment in modern mummification conducted by Dr

Robert Brier of Long Island University.

Shortly after death the body was taken to a place of purification (*ibu*), probably a tent on a hill where the wind would blow away the smell. The brain was ‘liquefied’ by using a hook inserted through the nostrils and rotated like a whisk. The body was turned upside down and the brain matter drained out and discarded.

The body was then washed in a natron solution, thus dehydrating it. Natron is a naturally occurring salt of sodium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate. A 10-centimetre incision was made in the side of the corpse using an obsidian knife (sharper than modern-day steel scalpels). The internal organs were removed through the incision and then cleaned, dried, wrapped and placed in four Canopic jars.

The eviscerated body cavity was cleaned with palm wine and packed with small bags of natron crystals and wheat chaff. The body was covered in natron crystals above and below until it was desiccated. About 250 kilograms of natron were used for a single body.

After thirty-five days the body was dry, but still slightly flexible. The natron was removed and the body moved to the house of beauty (*pr nfr*) where it was placed on blocks and carefully bandaged with linen strips and coated with resin. Particular care was taken with the fingers and toes. Amulets and spells were bound into the wrapping to give the body magical protection. The mummy was placed in its coffin, sometimes with a mask and garlands of flowers and herbs. The coffin was then placed in a stone sarcophagus (*sarcophagus* from the Greek literally means ‘flesh eating’).

Mummification was initially reserved for royalty, but over the centuries nobles and common folk who could afford it were also mummified. Some of the mummies that survived are extremely well preserved and are providing a source of DNA for scientists engaged in unravelling the complex relationships of the royal families.

Anubis supervising the mummification

But why did the ancient Egyptians mummify their deceased? Was it because they believed in the resurrection of the dead? Regrettably, we only have theory and supposition to guide us and there is as yet no documentation that satisfactorily answers the question. The most quoted answer is that bodies buried in the hot dry sand of the Egyptian desert were naturally desiccated but when burials began to take place in tombs, the bodies decomposed. Mummification was introduced to replace what had occurred naturally in the past.

The religious symbolism of mummification may have stemmed from the mythological story of Osiris' cut-up body being reassembled after his gruesome murder and being wrapped in linen by his sister/wife Isis. The god of mummification Anubis (actually a priest wearing a canine mask) was the overseer of the procedure. The entire process always took seventy days, precisely the same time the star Sirius, believed to be the goddess Isis, spent below the horizon each year before reappearing on the horizon and being reborn in the night sky over Egypt.

In considering the religious aspect of mummification, it is clear that preservation of the body was essential to the ancient Egyptian belief in the afterlife. Without the body, the *Ka*, or spirit, could not return to the tomb to find the sustenance left by relatives and friends. The spirit would not be able to access the spells inscribed on the walls of the tomb or in the Book of Life papyrus buried with the corpse. These spells were essential for the *Ka*'s survival. If the body decayed and was unrecognizable the *Ka* would be lost, go hungry and the afterlife of the deceased would be jeopardized.

The New Kingdom: 1550 BC–1069 BC

The five centuries of the New Kingdom witnessed high and low points. It was the most illustrious and, at times, the most notorious age in ancient Egypt. The New Kingdom opened with the defeat and expulsion from Egypt of the Hyksos invaders by Ahmose. Ahmose had lost a father and a brother, both of whom had led previous unsuccessful attempts against the Hyksos. As successful military commander, Ahmose took the dual crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. The land was once more united under a single monarch.

The title ‘pharaoh’ (when referring to the king) was used for the first time in the New Kingdom. The word is derived from the phrase *pr-aa* meaning the ‘Great House’. It was first used in a personal sense to refer to King Thutmose III, the sixth ruler of the 18th Dynasty, but we shall use it from Pharaoh Ahmose onwards. Each pharaoh had five names, but two are sufficient for identification.

Following the accession of King Ahmose, the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom went through a phase of major growth and expansion followed by years of consolidation.

However, the reign of Akhenaten, son of Amenhotep III was characterized by economic stagnation and social decay. The next phase was the social and administrative regeneration under Tutankhamen and Horemheb. The following 19th Dynasty saw massive recovery and growth under Sety I, Rameses II and Merenptah followed by the gradual deterioration and virtual collapse of the ancient Egyptian empire under a series of Rameses from III to XII (the 20th Dynasty).

Six pharaohs of the New Kingdom are of particular interest: Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, Tutankhamen and Rameses II.

Pharaoh Hatshepsut – The Female Pharaoh

Hatshepsut became pharaoh of all Egypt when she ascended the throne in a dubious manoeuvre that sidelined her stepson Thutmose III. She declared herself to be the daughter of the state-god Amen. She was a remarkable pharaoh who greatly expanded Egypt’s trade and influence.

Hatshepsut

Hatshepsut, arguably the greatest woman ever to have sat on the throne of ancient Egypt, ruled for about twenty-one years and died at the age of about fifty. Her mummy was identified in 2009.

Pharaoh Thutmose III

Thutmose III was known as the ‘Great Warrior Pharaoh’. During her period of control Hatshepsut had taken care of trade and administration. Now, as sole ruler Thutmose III expanded Egyptian power over Asia Minor to the borders of modern-day Turkey. He made seventeen expeditions, and turned Egypt into a great military power. He reigned for fifty-two years.

Thutmose III

The statues of Thutmose III show him to have a muscular physique and handsome refined countenance. Upon unwrapping his mummy, the Egyptologist Maspero reported that in place of the idealized model, ‘the forehead is abnormally low, the eyes deeply sunk, the jaw heavy, the lips thick, and the cheek-bones extremely prominent’. His mummy may be viewed at the Cairo Museum.

Pharaoh Amenhotep III

Amenhotep III was about twelve years of age when he came to the throne and ruled for about thirty-eight years. His lasting claim was to have steered Egypt through its golden years without resorting to warfare.

Amenhotep III

Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV)

Akhenaten is now a famous pharaoh of ancient Egypt despite attempts of the later rulers of Egypt to omit him from the lists of kings. He began his reign under the name Amenhotep IV, and he inherited a prosperous and peaceful nation. In the fifth or sixth year of his reign, he changed his name to Akhenaten (meaning ‘he who acts effectively on behalf of the sun disc’) and constructed a new capital city called Akhet-aten at modern-day Amarna. He was already married to Nefertiti when he came to the throne and they had two daughters.

Akhenaten

Nefertiti’s name means ‘the beautiful one has come’, and judging from the bust of Nefertiti in the Berlin Museum, her name was no exaggeration. Nefertiti’s parentage remains in doubt. Her mummy has not yet been identified, but with DNA testing taking place on the mummies of the ruling dynasty of her time, that situation may change.

In the ninth year of his reign, Akhenaten declared that Aten was the only god, and that he was the only intermediary between the Aten and the people. He ordered Amen’s temple to be closed and Amen’s name to be removed throughout Egypt.

Nefertiti

During her life, Nefertiti was a staunch supporter of her husband's efforts to enforce the worship of the single god, Aten, but a pharaoh and his royal wife had two tasks. One was to preserve stability in the land, the condition of peace and balance called Ma'at. The other task was to provide a male heir. Akhenaten and Nefertiti failed on both counts. Instead of peace, the new religion resulted in chaos. Nefertiti produced six daughters, but no male heir and, as the gender of a baby was considered to be the responsibility of the mother, she had to shoulder the blame.

Nefertiti was replaced as Akhenaten's royal wife by her oldest daughter, and when she produced a baby girl she was in turn replaced by the next daughter, who likewise gave birth to a girl. Her husband however is believed to have produced a son with his secondary wife (or concubine), Kiya, a son who would be called Tutankhamen.

Akhenaten died after seventeen years on the throne and his reforms did not survive long after. Mystery surrounds the immediate years following his death. A shadowy character whose coronation name was Neferneferuaten ascended the throne. It is believed by some that this was his half-brother or son; others believe that Nefertiti took the throne under that pseudonym as an interim measure after the death of her husband. After a short reign, the power passed to Akhenaten's nine-year-old son, the boy king Tutankhamen.

Akhenaten is sometimes considered the first monotheist. But although Akhenaten's religion did centre on one god, other gods were still mentioned in inscriptions. Ordinary people could not worship the Aten directly. They worshipped the king and the royal family. The new directive gave the king absolute power over

secular and religious life in Egypt. Akhenaten's motives may have been cynically political.

Pharaoh Tutankhamen

Tutankhamen is believed to be the son of Akhenaten and his secondary wife, Kiya. At about nine years of age, Tutankhamen succeeded his father to the throne. He was originally named Tut-ankh-Aten (meaning 'The Living Image of Aten') but it was changed to Tutankhamen as he tried to steer Egypt back to the worship of the state god, Amen-Re.

Tutankhamen
Photograph by Jon Bodsworth

Tutankhamen's tomb was discovered by archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922, over 3,000 years after the boy king had been entombed there. The tomb was virtually intact, having only suffered minor interference in ancient times. The tomb contained priceless treasures and artefacts, as well as the king's mummy lying in his solid gold coffin within a sarcophagus and shrines. It was a world-famous archaeological discovery and the magic of the boy king's tomb and mummy remains to this day.

The iconic treasures found in the tomb, now on display in the Cairo Museum, include the gilded shrines that surrounded his sarcophagus, the solid gold inner coffin and the beautiful gold mask that covered the pharaoh's face for 3,000 years. In addition, there are thrones, chairs, statues, chariots, jewellery and other delights.

Tutankhamen was married to his half-sister Ankhesenamen, a daughter of

Nefertiti, but it is thought that the fruits of their marriage were limited to two still-born female foetuses which were buried with the pharaoh.

Tutankhamen died at the age of nineteen and recent tests indicate that may have been as the result of a combination of factors. He suffered from a bone weakness, club foot and (minor) cleft palate, but it was a major complicated fracture of his left leg above the knee as well as cerebral malaria that were the main contributors to his demise. The trauma to his leg may have been the result of an accident or an injury sustained in combat or even an assassination attempt, there is no certainty at this stage. It is possible that the ultimate cause of death may have been either septicaemia or malarial fever.

Tutankhamen's reign saw an attempt to undo the damage done by Akhenaten to the Egyptian state and its economy. The young king was on the way to his goal of reinstating the ancient religions when he died. Tutankhamen left no heir to the throne. A high status courtier, Ay, perhaps distantly related to the royal family, married Tutankhamen's widow. This union legitimized his accession to power. He ascended the throne at the age of sixty-eight and he died four years later.

Pharaoh Horemheb, a military commander, took over from Ay and appointed Rameses I as his successor. Rameses I's son Sety I was followed in turn by Rameses II – The Great – and thus began the period of the Rameside rulers.

Pharaoh Rameses II the Great

Rameses II was about twenty years of age when he succeeded his father, Sety I, to the throne of Upper and Lower Egypt. His royal wife, Nefertari (not to be confused with Nefertiti), remained his primary wife and his great love until she died at an early age. Nefertari whose name means 'the most beautiful' was laid to rest in an exquisitely decorated rock-cut tomb in the Valley of the Queens.

Rameses the Great
Photograph by Steve F-E-Cameron

Rameses the Great, as he was known, ruled Egypt for sixty-seven years and during his reign the Egyptian Empire was greatly expanded through both military conquests and treaties. The two great foes of the Egyptians during this period were the Hittites, who emerged from southern Turkey as a fearless and ruthless power bent on expansion, and the Nubians to the south in modern-day Sudan, whose desire always had been to campaign northwards to overthrow Egypt and acquire the fertile Nile valley for their own nation.

Nefertari – from her tomb painting

Rameses II mounted military excursions and repelled Nubia on several occasions. He ordered a temple to be built on the banks of the Nile at Egypt's southern border (at Abu Simbel) where four colossal statues of Pharaoh Rameses glowered menacingly at anyone who might dare to challenge his might. On the same site he erected a beautiful temple for Nefertari, dedicated to the goddess *Hathor*. Nefertari is shown in statues at the front of the temple standing next to Rameses the Great.

Her statues are the same size as those of Rameses, an almost unheard of tribute to his royal wife. The inscription reads, *Nefertari, for whom the sun does shine.*

With Egypt expanding northwards through Asia Minor, and the Hittites engaged in a war of conquest southwards through the same area, conflict was inevitable. Rameses II marched his military forces northwards and fought the Hittites at the Battle of Kadesh. The history, as written by Egyptian scribes and illustrated by Egyptian artists, portrays Rameses II as the victor. But the battle was neither won nor lost, as each side withdrew to count the cost. Finally, a peace treaty was drawn up between the warring nations, and a Hittite bride was given to Rameses.

Rameses II lived until he was ninety or ninety-one years of age. He had several wives and is reputed to have sired about fifty sons and an equal number of daughters. On his death, his mummy was entombed in a rock-cut tomb, but subsequently it was moved and hidden by the priests to keep it from being damaged by tomb robbers. The well-preserved mummified body of the most powerful and longest-ruling of the Egyptian pharaohs, Rameses the Great, now lies in state in the Cairo Museum.

With the death of Rameses the Great, the golden years of the Egyptian Empire began to wane and his reign was followed by a long slide to mediocrity. His son Merenptah and the pharaohs that followed (nine of them taking the name of Rameses) took Egypt into the twilight of its empire. The next 400 years are collectively called the Third Intermediate Period.

Third Intermediate Period: 1075 BC–664 BC

The Third Intermediate Period began in 1075 BC with the founding of the 21st Dynasty, which lasted 124 years and saw Egypt split into two. Lower Egypt (the delta region) was ruled by a king in the delta city of Tanis, while Upper Egypt (the south) was controlled by the High Priest of Amen-Re at Thebes. This time, the division of the land did not result in conflict, and there was a high degree of co-operation between the two areas, including that most obvious of all socio-political bonds – marriage. The title of High Priest of Amen gave the bearers control over the domains of Amen and emphasized that they derived their power from Amen. In the combinations of royal and priestly titles it is clear that the rulers of Tanis and Thebes only represented an idealised kingship.

Regrettably, personal ambition soon prevailed. The high priest of Amen-Re, Pseusennes did not wait for his turn on the throne, but took full regal status for himself and passed the pontificate of Amen–Re to his own son. So once again Egypt was divided. Later this Theban power was curtailed.

The 22nd Dynasty was established by Shoshenq I, believed to have been a descendant of the long-settled Libyan mercenaries. The new leader changed the system of rule yet again, introducing a decentralized structure whereby kings ruled from the north and their sons ruled key centres elsewhere. Egypt was divided into eleven autonomous states, each responsible for their own security and largely with allegiance to their own gods.

It was not until the invasion of Egypt by the Nubians *c.*747 BC that the 25th Dynasty was established under King Piye, and continued by his brother Shabaka, that the Nubian kings brought a semblance of unity to Egypt once more. Continually under threat from the Assyrians, the Egyptians struggled in vain to retain their fragile independence.

The desire to rid themselves of foreign rulers runs deep in the veins of Egyptians. The hold of the Assyrians was finally broken by Psametek I of the 26th Dynasty who restored centralized authority and Egypt entered a new, if somewhat short-lived, golden age. The Third Intermediate Period ended and the Late Period commenced, but Egypt’s enemies were legion and Egypt’s future as an independent nation remained precarious.

The Late Period: 664 BC–332 BC

The Late Period began with sixty years of rule by the 26th Dynasty of delta princes from Sais. It included the last period during which ancient Egypt functioned as an independent political entity. During these years, Egyptian culture was under pressure from major civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean. The socio-economic system was strong and flexible, and this fact protected the nation during these years of triumph and disaster. Throughout the Late Period, Egypt maintained a centralized state based on earlier indigenous models, except for two periods of Persian occupation.

The last pharaoh of the 26th Dynasty, Ahmose II (*c.*569–526 BC), was of Libyan ancestry. He came to power with the help of mercenary soldiers. Under Ahmose II Egypt enjoyed its last brilliant period. The Babylonians tried twice to invade Egypt and were repulsed. After a first failed attempt, Nebuchadnezzar attacked the Delta in 568 BC. Ahmose hired Ionian mercenaries and the defence of Egypt was successful. Ahmose conquered Cyprus in 560 BC, which Egypt held until its conquest by the Persians in 525 BC. A few months after the death of Ahmose II, his son Psametek III was deposed when the Persians under King Cambyses II conquered Egypt.

Libya and the Greeks of Cyrene surrendered to Cambyses, but his attempts to enlarge his African possessions were largely unsuccessful. The conquest of the Greek colony at Siwa Oasis failed, when his army died on the march through the desert and his Nubian campaign led only to the establishment of a Persian garrison at Elephantine. Cambyses successor, Darius I re-excavated the canal connecting the Nile, and thus the Mediterranean, with the Red Sea, promoting trade.

The Persians ruled Egypt as a satrapy (province) from *c.*525–404 BC, but once more resurgent Egyptian nationalism displaced the considerably weakened Persians. The 28th, 29th and 30th Dynasties took power in Egypt and for another sixty years Egypt enjoyed the rule of the last Egyptian pharaohs. The founder of the 30th – and last – Dynasty, Nectanebo I ousted the legal heir and withstood a Persian attack on the delta, suffering heavy casualties. His son Teos, and his allies invaded Palestine, but in order to pay his mercenaries he raised taxes. His cousin Nectanebo II took advantage of the Egyptian resentment of the taxes and the confiscation of temple property and with the support of the priesthood replaced Teos. Nectanebo II was the last ruler of Egypt who could claim genuine Egyptian origin until the revolution which brought General Neguib to power in 1952, some 2,300 years later.

The Persians resumed their rule of Egypt in *c.*341 BC when Ataxerxes defeated the Egyptian forces at Pelusium and established the 31st Dynasty. In summary,

much of the Persian reign over Egypt was uneventful, but there were occasionally revolts, such as the rebellion against taxation of 486 BC ruthlessly put down by Xerxes. Despite the frequent changes of political circumstances, the country was often prosperous in the Late Period. Great temples continued to be built, though they survived poorly. Artisans produced many bronze and stone statues, without introducing new ideas but rather harking back to Egypt's splendid past, but a new and great power was rising in the region – the power of Alexander the Great of Macedon.

The Ptolemaic Period: 332 BC–30 BC

Alexander the Great

In the autumn of 332 BC Alexander the Great, ruler of Macedonia, conquered Egypt. His occupation marked the start of the Hellenistic influence in Egypt. He met no resistance from the Persian garrison at the frontier and was welcomed by the Egyptians as a deliverer.

Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great crossed the northern Egyptian delta and led his army to the most western branch of the Nile. He established a camp at Lake Maryut. Alexander realized the strategic importance of this area lying as it does between the fresh-water lake and the Mediterranean Sea, and he ordered his architect to construct the city known as Alexandria, which would be a veritable showcase of imperial splendour.

The Macedonian leader required the respect and acceptance of the people of Egypt. He went on a pilgrimage to Siwa Oasis, where the oracle of the temple there proclaimed him to be the son of Amen-Re. Cloaked with this affirmation he was now able to reorganize the administration of Egypt. He preserved the system of local government and appointed Greeks and Egyptians to the major offices of the land. Administrative positions went to Egyptians. The equitable division of state

authority found favour with the Egyptians and avoided any nationalist revolts.

Although he only spent several months in Egypt, his impact was immense. He left a country reformed, at peace and within the ambit of Greek civilization in the Mediterranean and, most of all, a new capital city.

Alexander died in Babylon in 323 BC, suddenly and tragically of a high fever. He was only thirty-three and virtual master of the known world. He left no viable heir, and following his death the Macedonian Empire was divided among his generals into four satrapies. His general, Ptolemy, became the new ruler of Egypt as a satrap or ‘governor’. Alexander had opened the way for Egypt to become part of a Macedonian empire that welcomed Greeks and Macedonians into its Egyptian culture. With the founding of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, Alexander’s dream of a Graeco-Egyptian country with the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria was to become a reality.

The Ptolemaic Period

General Ptolemy was the first of the dynasty that would bear his name. Ptolemy I got rid of his only rival and was proclaimed the Pharaoh of Egypt, a title bestowed despite his and future Ptolemy’s adherence to Macedonian traditions. Ptolemy then took the name Ptolemy I Soter (meaning ‘The Saviour’). He definitively moved the capital from Memphis to Alexandria.

Ptolemy I Soter

The Ptolemy Dynasty was to rule Egypt for the next 300 years. There were fifteen pharaohs who took the name Ptolemy and they were absolutely ruthless. Murder was their stock-in-trade and their victims included brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. They indulged in every form of incest imaginable. While most of them married their sisters, one married his mother and at least one other married his granddaughter. Although the Ptolemies were a morally degenerate family, during their reign magnificent structures were erected, such as the Pharos lighthouse and the great bibliotek, or library, believed to have housed much of the civilized world's greatest literature. Finally, an ambitious and talented woman came to the throne of Egypt.

Cleopatra VII 51 BC–30 BC

Cleopatra VII was seventeen years old when she and her half-brother Ptolemy XIII succeeded their father, Ptolemy XII, to the throne. Within two years, Cleopatra had come into conflict with her half-brother. The ministers found it much easier to deal with a fifteen-year-old boy than with her. Cleopatra and her half-sister Arsinoe were exiled.

In Rome, civil strife was the order of the day. Julius Caesar challenged Pompey for the right to rule the Roman Empire. Caesar's troops defeated Pompey who fled to Egypt where he was murdered on the instructions of the thirteen-year-old Ptolemy XIII's councillors.

It is probable that Ptolemy XIII's councillors had Pompey killed in order to ingratiate the young Ptolemy with Caesar. Upon Caesar's arrival in Alexandria, the Roman was presented with Pompey's head. It was a bad miscalculation on the young Ptolemy's part. Caesar was enraged. Although Pompey was Caesar's political enemy, he was also a Roman consul and Caesar's son-in-law. Caesar took control of Alexandria. As the arbiter of the dispute between Cleopatra and her half-brother, Caesar supported Cleopatra's claim to the throne.

Cleopatra
Photograph by Louis le Grand

Cleopatra returned from exile determined to reclaim her place on the throne of Egypt. She was clever, well-educated and, in addition to Greek, she was fluent in several languages including Latin and Egyptian. She was by all accounts sensual and seductive. Legend has it that she was smuggled into Caesar's presence in a carpet. However her incursion into Caesar's quarters was accomplished, Cleopatra clearly made a favourable impression on the Roman leader and they became lovers.

After his dalliance with Cleopatra, Caesar was called upon to render a decision regarding the throne of Egypt. He confirmed that the fifteen-year-old Ptolemy XIII was king of Egypt, but was required to marry and rule jointly with his half-sister Cleopatra. Having discovered that Caesar and Cleopatra were lovers, Ptolemy XIII claimed he had been betrayed. He assembled a 20,000-strong Egyptian army and surrounded Alexandria. He was bent on removing the Romans from Egyptian soil. Cleopatra's sister Arsinoe joined Ptolemy. Cleopatra never forgave Arsinoe for her act of treachery.

In a fierce battle for Alexandria, Caesar's forces prevailed. Ptolemy XIII was drowned in the Nile while trying to escape and Arsinoe taken prisoner. In the course of the battle, the library of Alexandria, the repository of the greatest inventory of papyri the world had known, was burnt to the ground. After his victory, Caesar placed Cleopatra on the throne and, in keeping with the practice of the times, she married her second half-brother, the eleven-year-old Ptolemy XIV, who was declared her co-regent.

Caesar enjoyed the fruits of his relationship long enough for Cleopatra to become

pregnant. She gave birth to a son whom she named Ptolemy Caesar, or Caesarion. Caesar returned to Rome to celebrate his victory over Pompey and Ptolemy XIII. As part of the spectacle he arranged to have Arsinoe dragged in gold chains behind a chariot, although he spared her life. He sent for Cleopatra and installed her and baby in a palace in Rome. Cleopatra was very unpopular with the Romans, who called her 'Caesar's whore from the east'. Caesar spent most of his time with Cleopatra, neglecting his wife, Calpurnia.

Caesar refused to take a crown but was enticed by public acclaim to accept the title Dictator for Life. But in 44 BC, a coterie of Roman senators, led by Cassius and Caesar's friend Brutus, conspired to murder Caesar. The Master of the Horse, Caesar's right-hand man, Mark Antony, was sidelined and Octavius, Caesar's nominated heir, agreed to look the other way. Caesar was duly assassinated on 15 March (the Ides of March) 44 BC. Fearful of a Roman backlash against her, Cleopatra hurried back to Egypt. Upon her return, her co-ruler and half-brother Ptolemy XIV was poisoned, probably on Cleopatra's orders. Cleopatra then made her four-year-old son, Caesarion, her co-ruler. After Caesar's assassination, the various elements of the Senate fought several battles for the right to rule. Brutus and Cassius, two of the conspirators, assembled an army to attack Rome from Gaul. Mark Antony, Octavius and Lepidus formed a triumvirate which defeated the conspirators, and the Roman Empire was divided in three. Octavius, who took the title Emperor Octavian, ruled the western empire from Rome; Lepidus ruled Hispania and the province of Africa, while Mark Antony controlled the eastern Roman Empire, which included Egypt.

Mark Antony summoned Cleopatra to Tarsus to confront her as a conspirator in Caesar's assassination. Cleopatra's famous progress to meet Mark Antony is well documented. She sailed to Tarsus in a gold-decked ship and dazzled Mark Antony with a show of opulence and a sensual display that matched his own sexual proclivity. Cleopatra was cleared of the charge of conspiracy and she persuaded Mark Antony to put the three people to death who might be a threat to her throne. One of them was her sister Arsinoe whose life had been spared by Caesar.

Cleopatra's progress to meet Mark Antony. Painting by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1883

Mark Antony was already married to Octavia, Emperor Octavian's sister, as part of the deal that divided the Roman Empire. This inconvenient fact did not stop him marrying Cleopatra as well, in a ceremony in which he played the role of the new Dionysus and Cleopatra was the new Isis. Cleopatra already had twins with Mark Antony, a boy, Alexander Helios (the sun), and a girl named Cleopatra Selene (the moon). She was to have a third child by him called Ptolemy Philadelphus. Enamoured with Cleopatra, Mark Antony followed her back to Alexandria.

Mark Antony made many grants of territory to Cleopatra, including Cyprus, Cyrene, Chalcis and the coast of Cilicia, all of which had previously been parts of the Egyptian Empire.

Mark Antony's military endeavours met with mixed results. His campaign against the Parthians, using money advanced to him by Cleopatra, was a total failure. Mark Antony fully expected Octavian to supply additional Roman legions to fight the Parthians, but the Roman emperor reneged on his promise. With Egyptian money and augmented by Cleopatra's troops Mark Antony then led a successful campaign into Armenia.

The Roman triumvirate was disbanded in 33 BC, and it was inevitable that Mark Antony would have to face the challenge of Octavian for the right of supremacy over the Roman Empire.

Three years later in 31 BC, at the sea battle of Actium, Octavian's fleet under Agrippa defeated the combined fleets of Antony and Cleopatra. The result was catastrophic for Mark Antony. His soldiers deserted in large numbers before he even had a chance to engage Octavian's forces. Mark Antony's remaining troops surrendered or were decimated.

Mark Antony was set to flee, but when he heard that Cleopatra had been captured, he attempted to commit suicide by falling on his sword. Dying, he was

taken to Alexandria where Cleopatra had been incarcerated. There, his body was brought to the mausoleum where she was held prisoner.

Cleopatra had Caesarion smuggled out of Alexandria and then, to avoid being humiliated by Octavian as her sister Arsinoe had been by Caesar, legend has it she took her own life by clasping a venomous snake to her body, supposedly an asp but more likely to have been a cobra. The bite from an asp results in a lingering, agonizing death, whereas a cobra bite produces a rapid and less painful demise.

The death of Cleopatra. Painting by Reginald Arthur, 1892

Cleopatra's death in 30 BC signalled the end of the reign of an independent Egypt. Octavian declared Egypt to be a Roman province and the Roman emperors became rulers of Egypt through their prefects. Although the Ptolemies were Macedonian by descent and culture, they had ruled Egypt as pharaohs. Cleopatra was therefore the last native-born pharaoh of Egypt.

The 3,000 years of ancient Egyptian history had come to an end. A period of nearly 2,000 years was to follow under the rule of a succession of foreigners, starting with the Romans and ending with the British. In 1953, Muhammad Naguib became the first president of modern Egypt. Except for Ptolemies who, although born in Egypt, always maintained their Macedonian culture, Naguib was the first native ruler of Egypt since Nectanebo II in 341 BC.

The Legacy of Ancient Egypt

In the years that followed Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 there was a tremendous surge of interest in all things Egyptian. Everything from building and furniture design to clothing and art reflected the influence of ancient Egypt. It was a period of 'Egyptomania', which has not totally dissipated today. Films featuring 'The Mummy', travelling exhibitions of the Treasures of Tutankhamen, tourism, TV documentaries and books galore all testify to the durability of the public's interest in Egypt. However, the true legacy is perhaps a little less recognized.

In the Temple of Kom Ombo there is a wall carving of a set of surgical and midwifery instruments that would not be out of place in a doctor's bag more than 2,000 years later. The astronomy and mathematics applied to the building of the pyramids and temples laid a foundation for the Greek scientists that followed. The beauty of the sculptures and paintings has provided inspiration for generations of subsequent artists.

A belief in a life after death dictated by one's good or bad acts, reviewed at a final divine judgement, may be found in modern religious beliefs and practices. Most of all, there is the fundamental tenet that life should be a balance of fairness, justice and good order that pervades modern philosophy for which we should be grateful to the ancient Egyptians.

Much has been discovered about ancient Egypt, but according to Egyptologists and archaeologists themselves only a small percentage of Egypt's history has been revealed. What remains to be discovered will continue to amaze and enchant future generations.

Appendix 1: Key Players

King Narmer (*c.*3100 BC)

It is clear from the iconography carved on the Palette of King Narmer that he ruled over both Lower and Upper Egypt. In the two depictions of him on the palette he is shown wearing the crown of Upper Egypt on one side and the crown of Lower Egypt on the reverse. By conquering and consolidating the tribes spread along the banks of the Nile and in the delta, Narmer created a nation. Although the two lands of Egypt were to separate and re-join many times in the future, the goal was always to be united as a single nation.

King Djoser (*c.*2667 BC)

King Djoser's Stepped Pyramid was the first stone edifice built in Egypt and one of the first in the world. The vision of Djoser's architect, Imhotep, provided the example for subsequent construction and the paradigm shift from mud-brick to stone must rank as a major step forward. The longevity of the Stepped Pyramid and the complexity of the subterranean chambers pay lasting tribute to the skill of those early builders.

King Khufu (*c.*2589 BC)

The huge, complex and enigmatic Great Pyramid of Giza is ascribed to King Khufu. It is the only survivor of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The proverb attributed to the Arabs which states 'Men fear time, but time fears the pyramid' testifies to the age and durability of the edifice. However, despite intense study, there is no unanimity as to its purpose and theories range from royal burial site to alien landmark! Ironically, the only statue of Khufu, the builder of the Great Pyramid, ever found is only 7.5 centimetres (3 inches) high.

Mentuhotep II (*c.*2055 BC)

King Mentuhotep II's claim to the key player list lies in his success in re-unifying Egypt after the First Intermediate Period. The country had become fractured and small armies had sprung up under the control of rival tribal lords. In that state, Egypt

was severely weakened and prey to any foreign army. Mentuhotep II took control, stripping the individual tribal leaders of their militia and assembly a single national army.

King Ahmose (*c.*1550 BC)

The first king of the New Kingdom, Ahmose defeated and expelled the Hyksos (invading foreigners) who had ruled Egypt for a century. Ahmose established the 18th Dynasty, ushering in a time of unprecedented wealth and glory. By dedicating his victory to the god Amen, Ahmose was responsible for the upsurge in the worship of Amen-Re and the previously minor god's elevation to the state god of Egypt. Gratitude to Amen-Re continued to be expressed over centuries and most of the ancient temples that remain today were built to house Amen-Re.

Pharaoh Thutmose III (*c.*1479 BC)

Often called the Napoleon of Egypt (or King David, by some), Thutmose III ruled Egypt for fifty-four years, the first twenty-two of which were in co-regency with his stepmother, Hatshepsut. During his seventeen campaigns of conquest, Thutmose III expanded Egypt enormously. His armies defeated the Canaanites, the Syrians and the Mittani (modern-day Iraq) in addition to the subjugation of many tribal entities. The resultant flow of tribute swelled the coffers of Egypt and set up the 18th Dynasty for its golden age.

Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) (*c.*1351 BC)

Four years after acceding to the throne as Amenhotep IV, he changed his name to Akhenaten and moved his capital from Thebes to the newly established city of Akhet-Aten. From this new seat of power he banned the worship of all the old gods. He closed the temples, effectively making tens of thousands of priests and temple workers redundant. He declared there was only one god, the disc of the sun called the Aten. He set about destroying all references to the old gods, particularly the state god Amen-Re. Akhenaten's seventeen-year monotheistic revolution caused chaos in Egypt and his obsession with the Aten, to the exclusion of all else, particularly foreign policy, brought Egypt to the brink of disaster. Whether he was a visionary or a lunatic, a hero or a heretic, remains a point of contention among historians today.

Pharaoh Tutankhamen (*c.*1332 BC)

Tutankhamen was a minor pharaoh, coming to the throne at the age of nine and ruling for about nine years. For most of his reign he was probably guided by his courtiers. Historically, he was a lightweight, but he was propelled to the top of the leader-board of famous pharaohs by the discovery of his virtually intact royal tomb. When Howard Carter opened the tomb in 1922 and revealed the existence of the burial chamber, complete with the pharaoh's mummy and its treasures, Egyptomania took off and had not appreciably slowed down for the past ninety years. Tutankhamen deserves his place as a key player, less because of what he did but more because of what he left behind.

Pharaoh Rameses II (Rameses the Great) (*c.*1279 BC)

Undoubtedly the greatest pharaoh of ancient Egypt, Rameses II ruled the Egyptian Empire for sixty-seven years. Under his forceful leadership, Egypt surged forth to become the major power of the region. History as recorded by Egyptian scribes contains stories of his victorious campaigns and personal bravery, although more objective reporters may have waxed less lyrical. He led successful campaigns against the Syrians (several times), the Nubians and the Libyans. He claimed victory against the Hittites at Kadesh, although it is apparent from the subsequent peace treaty that there was no clear winner. Rameses II left an incredible collection of statuary and temples, some of which are still being excavated and discovered today. He took several wives and sired over fifty sons and a similar number of daughters. He outlived many of his children and when he died at the estimated age of ninety, his thirteenth son, Merneptah, became pharaoh. Examination of his mummy revealed that Rameses had red hair, a feature associated with the god Seth, the slayer of Osiris. His father's name, Set, may indicate that red hair was a familial trait. Rameses II was called Ozymandias (a corruption of the Greek version of his throne name *User-maat-Re Setep-en-Re)* in the poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Pharaoh Ahmose II (*c.*569 BC)

A thousand years after the rule of Ahmose I, his namesake was a worthy bearer of that glorious name. Called Amasis by the Greeks, Ahmose II was a commoner who seized power during a military rebellion in which the ruling pharaoh Apries was strangled. Conflicting reports say Apries was killed in battle. Made king by popular acclaim, Ahmose married the daughter of the deceased king to legitimize his claim to the throne. During his 43-year reign, Ahmose was able to defeat two attacks by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, but his greatest achievement was in the area of agricultural reform. The historian Herodotus, who visited Egypt less than a

century after Ahmose's reign writes: 'It is said that it was during the reign of Ahmose II that Egypt attained its highest level of prosperity both in respect of what the river gave the land and in respect of what the land yielded to men and that the number of inhabited cities at that time reached in total 20,000.' Finally the Persians, kept at bay through devious diplomacy for many years, attacked and defeated Egypt, but only after the death of Ahmose II in *c.*526 BC.

Alexander the Great (332 BC)

Alexander of Macedon, conqueror of Greece, Persia and Egypt, was a key player in many productions before striding on to the Egyptian stage in 332 BC. Unlike his reception in Asia Minor and India, Alexander was welcomed by the Egyptians as a liberator from their Persian overlords. He was feted as the son of Amen by the oracle at Siwa, and subsequently often referred to Zeus-Amen as his true father. Currency was issued which depicted Alexander with ram's horns, the symbol of his divinity. Although he spent only two short years in Egypt, he founded Alexandria, the city that still bears his name, which became the prosperous capital and centre of learning of the Ptolemaic Kingdom that followed his death.

Cleopatra VII Philopator (51–30 BC)

Cleopatra is the subject of books, poems, dramas, plays, paintings and legend, but her story may readily be reduced to a single word – patriotism. What is more, it was patriotism towards a land that was not hers by heritage, although she was born in Egypt. Cleopatra has been portrayed as a devious, self-serving megalomaniac prepared to do whatever it took to retain personal power, and in truth that may be the case. But a glimpse behind the veil reveals a person whose obsession was with Egypt, first, last and always. Her skilful diplomacy, aided by her talents as a paramour, was directed at the protection of Egypt in the unequal struggle against the might of Rome, a struggle that would eventually result in her death.

Appendix 2: Timeline of Ancient Egypt

DATE APPROX.	PERIOD	DYNASTY	MAJOR KINGS AND PHARAOHS
3100 BC	The Protodynastic Period	0	Narmer
2900 BC		I	Menes
2600 BC	The Old Kingdom	II	
2500 BC		III	Djoser
2400 BC		IV	Sneferu, Khufu
2300 BC		V	Khafre, Menkaure
2200 BC		VI	Unas
2100 BC	The First Intermediate Period	VII–X	Teti, Pepy II
2000 BC	The Middle Kingdom	XI	Mentuhotep II
1900 BC		XII	Amenemhat I
1800 BC		XIII	
1700 BC	The Second Intermediate Period	XIV–XVII	
1600 BC			

1500 BC	The New Kingdom	XVIII	Amenhotep III, Akhenaten
1400 BC			Tutankhamen
1300 BC			Horemheb
1200 BC		XIX	Rameses the Great
1100 BC		XX	Rameses III
1000 BC	The Third Intermediate Period	XXI to XXV	Psusennes
900 BC			Sheshonq, Orsokon
800 BC			Taharqa
700 BC			
600 BC	The Late Period	XXVII	Cambyses, Darius
500 BC		XXVIII–XXXI	Nectanebo
400 BC	The Hellenistic Period	Macedonian	Alexander the Great
300 BC		Ptolemaic	Ptolemy I–Ptolemy XIV
200 BC			
100 BC			Cleopatra VII
0	The Roman Period		